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Lack of transit panelists may have cost us
Only two House committee members represent region

By Lisa Friedman
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Saturday, August 06, 2005 - WASHINGTON - Call it congestion without representation.

Despite its more than 3,300 miles of freeway and countless traffic woes, the greater Los Angeles area has only two representatives on the House Transportation Committee, an imbalance that local experts - and even one lawmaker - said may have hurt the region's effort to bring in more dollars from the new federal highway bill.

"Clearly, we don't have the representation," said **Mark Pisano**, executive director of the Southern California Association of Governments.

"We've had a hard time getting people to serve on the committee. They've got a lot of other interests, I guess. Infrastructure and building doesn't seem to have the sense of priority that it did when our state was truly in its growth era."

In all, five Californians sit on the 75-member committee, making up about 7 percent of the panel that regulates air, road and rail policy and which every six years sets key funding levels for local highway projects, as it did last week with a \$286.4-billion package.

Of the Californians, two are from the Bay Area, one is from San Diego and Reps. Gary Miller, R-Diamond Bar, and Juanita Millender-McDonald, D-Long Beach, serve the interests of Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Orange counties.

By contrast, Californians make up 16 percent of the House Judiciary Committee, which debates everything from presidential impeachment to immigration; 18 percent of the House Resources Committee, which deals with federal land and water policy; and 24 percent of the International Relations Committee, which oversees foreign policy pronouncements.

Choosing or being chosen for a committee in Congress is a complicated mix of personal preference, power jockeying and political patronage.

The Transportation Committee, like Appropriations and the tax-writing Ways and Means Committee, is known as a "juice" panel, a way lawmakers can funnel money to their congressional districts and also leverage top-dollar campaign funds.

Yet of those, Transportation is widely viewed on Capitol Hill as the committee with limited cache or influence.

Indeed, having a seat on the Transportation Committee is not even a key to unlocking highway dollars. Evidence of that is the House Appropriations Committee chairman, Rep. Jerry Lewis, R-Redlands, whose district will get about \$95 million in transportation projects, and Rep. Bill Thomas, R-Bakersfield, chairman the Ways and Means Committee, who brought more than \$722 million to his Kern County district.

Still, transit experts said, membership does have its privileges.

In the highway spending bill awaiting President Bush's signature, the average Republican on the Transportation Committee controlled about \$40 million. Lawmakers not on the committee were allotted \$12 million to \$20 million each, aides said.

Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Riverside, leaving a meeting of California Republicans last week as they learned the Alameda Corridor East freight rail project would get only \$155 million of its \$900 million request, said the lack of a Southland presence on the committee may have played a hand.

"We suffered, perhaps, by not having as many people at the table," Issa said. Differences can be seen even within California.

Contra Costa County, for example, in the congressional district of Transportation Committee member Ellen Tauscher, D-Walnut Creek, will get \$59.80 per person. Santa Clara County, which includes the congressional district of Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose, another committee member, will get \$69.62 per person.

Los Angeles County, meanwhile, which has about 3 million more people than the entire eight-county Bay Area, will get about \$64.70 per person.

Sarah Adams, **Southern California Association of Governments'** head of government affairs, said the group is still tallying how the region fared, but she said she believes the region's sparse representation did hurt, particularly in the frenzied last days of negotiations between key House and Senate members before the bill passed.

"So much happens during the conference committee, and having the representation of the state during the conference committee is critical. Absolutely, I think it affects the return to California," she said.

"It helps," said Tim Ransdell, director of the California Federal Institute in Washington, D.C. Rep. Elton Gallegly, R-Thousand Oaks, who serves on the Resources, Intelligence, International Relations and Judiciary committees, said he believes lawmakers took care of their regions' highway needs even if they weren't on the transit panel.

"California should feel very good that we did as well as we did," he said.

Miller, who represents Chino and Chino Hills, agreed and said the number of Southlanders on the committee is irrelevant.

"We did very well on earmarks, more than anyone ever thought we'd get," Miller said. "You could have put five more Californians on there, and we would have done just as well."